

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Breaking Contact Under Fire

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On 13 September 1993, in Mogadishu, Somalia, elements of the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, successfully broke contact under heavy fire in an urban environment. This force succeeded primarily because its soldiers abided by the key principles of retrograde operations, including the use of multiple routes, obstacles, air and ground reserves, and fire support from defending forces.

The battle itself began a little after 0700, following the successful completion of a cordon and search mission against an arms cache of Mohammed Farah Aideed's forces, the Somali National Alliance (SNA). The arms cache was in the northern section of the city, approximately 1,000 meters to the north of the United Nations (UN) and U.S. compound at the former Embassy and the University of Mogadishu. The battalion commander's intent was to reduce the threat to UN and U.S. forces by depriving the SNA of weapons, staging areas, and key leaders.

Before U.S. forces could withdraw from the objective, an unknown number of SNA militia moved into the area to confront Companies B and C of the battalion, each of which had a psychological operations (PSYOPS) team and an engineer squad attached. Elements under immediate battalion task force control that were also directly engaged in this battle included 3d Platoon, Com-

pany C, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, the battalion's antitank (AT) platoon, the scout platoon, a civil affairs team, and the combat trains. The approving authority for the mission was United Nation Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM), phase two of which was known as Operation *Continue Hope*.

When the U.S. operation in Somalia began on 9 December 1992—with the Marines conducting a beach landing at Mogadishu—the primary threat they faced was large numbers of relatively untrained but highly experienced urban guerrillas.

The total number of SNA militia was unknown, but was generally accepted to be 2,000 to 5,000. Their weaponry consisted of mostly nonfunctioning crew-served weapons mounted on Japanese pickup trucks, a few operational 82mm mortars, and a seemingly limitless supply of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and small arms ammunition. Also, some of the civilian noncombatants would occasionally act as the auxiliary by providing hiding places for guerrillas and weapons and by alerting the militia to U.S. presence in the area.

Soon after the arrival of U.S. troops in the country, forces fanned out across the country to secure relief agency sites in other towns. Most of these locations were manned by one infantry battalion each, sometimes supplemented by combat troops from UN members such as

Belgium and Pakistan. The other UN countries present either limited their involvement to support personnel or kept their combat troops in the capital city. By the end of the first month of U.S. operations, both Marines and 10th Mountain Division soldiers had been involved in shooting incidents in Mogadishu and surrounding towns.

Throughout the first five or six months of the operation, combat forces consisted of one U.S. Army infantry brigade with divisional headquarters and support units, one Marine Corps expeditionary unit, offshore for the most part, and approximately one battalion each from Italy, Pakistan, Belgium, Malaysia, Tunisia, Egypt, and Turkey. Combat support and combat service support units included forces from Australia, France, Germany, and Sweden. UNOSOM's immediate objectives were to secure relief agency efforts to prevent further starvation, and to prevent the inter-clan fighting that was severely affecting the local populace. This initial mission was successful because of the overwhelming array of forces sent into theater and the Somalis' initial hesitance to engage the UN in full force before it could determine what the reaction might be.

By the time UNOSOM II, or Operation *Continue Hope*, began around May 1993, U.S. combat forces consisted of one infantry battalion in Mogadishu.

The U.S. mission consisted of a quick-reaction force (QRF) for the UN, for the purpose of securing and protecting UN operations. UN forces had assumed all of the missions in the outlying towns. Concurrently, clan militias had grown more comfortable with the UN presence and had once again resumed their inter-clan battles. While the SNA limited itself to demonstrations and riots during this period, its people were also closely observing UN and U.S. reactions to the resumed clan fighting.

On 5 June 1993 Aideed began his fight for the rule of Mogadishu when the SNA ambushed a Pakistani convoy, killing 23 peacekeepers. The UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution calling for "the arrest, prosecution, and trial of those believed responsible for the attack." U.S. forces in country, now at an all-time manpower low, were conducting more aggressive operations and were being engaged by direct and indirect fire almost daily. In addition to their official mission as the QRF, they were now conducting the manhunt for Aideed and his lieutenants. (The soldiers came to call this manhunt the "Elvis" mission, since every two or three days some local intelligence source would report an Aideed sighting, but no attempt at a snatch mission would ever be successful at locating him.) Additionally, instead of waiting for UN-directed missions to come down to the battalion, the command group began to initiate concepts, develop their own plans, and send them higher for approval. This led to a more aggressive operational tempo and more conflicts with the SNA. The battalion commander's intent was to keep the guerrillas off-balance by depriving them of the initiative.

On 8 September 1993 the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry's quick-reaction company (QRC) conducted an impromptu cordon and search in response to intelligence that indicated the possible cache site of a mortar tube that had been shelling the University compound almost nightly (Figure 1). Although no mortar tube was discovered, the QRC recovered documents that indicated weapons were being stored in buildings referred to as the Blood Bank and the

Old Ministry of Defense. Both of these buildings were on the edge of a known SNA enclave, and both were within direct supporting range and line of sight of the Benadir Hospital, a known SNA strongpoint. The battalion intelligence officer believed that each building housed up to 50 militia members, with limited security patrols occurring after dark.

The orders group, of which I was a member, began planning a cordon and search against this target. (Because of the proximity to so much SNA activity, the running joke was that this was a new form of operation, a "cordon and search to contact.") The planning sequence took about two days, with the battalion operations officer taking us through a process that encompassed facts, assumptions, specified and implied tasks, and course-of-action development. Because of the likelihood of enemy contact, both the intelligence annex and the order itself fully prepared the units involved for the contingency of stiff enemy resistance. At the end of the second day of planning, the staff presented the various courses of action to the commander.

The overall objective was named ODIN (Figure 2); the separate company objectives were LOKI and THOR (Figure 3). My role in this operation would

be to provide combat support. I placed my platoon sergeant in charge of the actual combat trains vehicles. I would lead the four support platoon soldiers who were tasked out to the S-1 for the purpose of establishing the detainee collection point and providing detainee security. The collection point was to be at a small circular intersection between and on the south side of LOKI and THOR. My small team was in radio contact with the combat trains, which would roll forward on my order to pick up detainees and confiscated equipment. All the units participating in the mission attended an operation order briefing, conducted by the executive officer, and afterward were given written copies of the order and about 24 hours to conduct their own planning. Following final briefbacks to the battalion commander, the unit was ready to execute.

Beginning at 0300 hours, an OH-58D helicopter kept ODIN and the surrounding area under constant surveillance. The helicopter maintained enough standoff to avoid alerting the inhabitants of the objective area but reported nothing significant. Before the main body moved out of the compound, scout platoon snipers occupied guard towers on the eastern perimeter of the Embassy compound. Their purpose was twofold: Provide overwatching

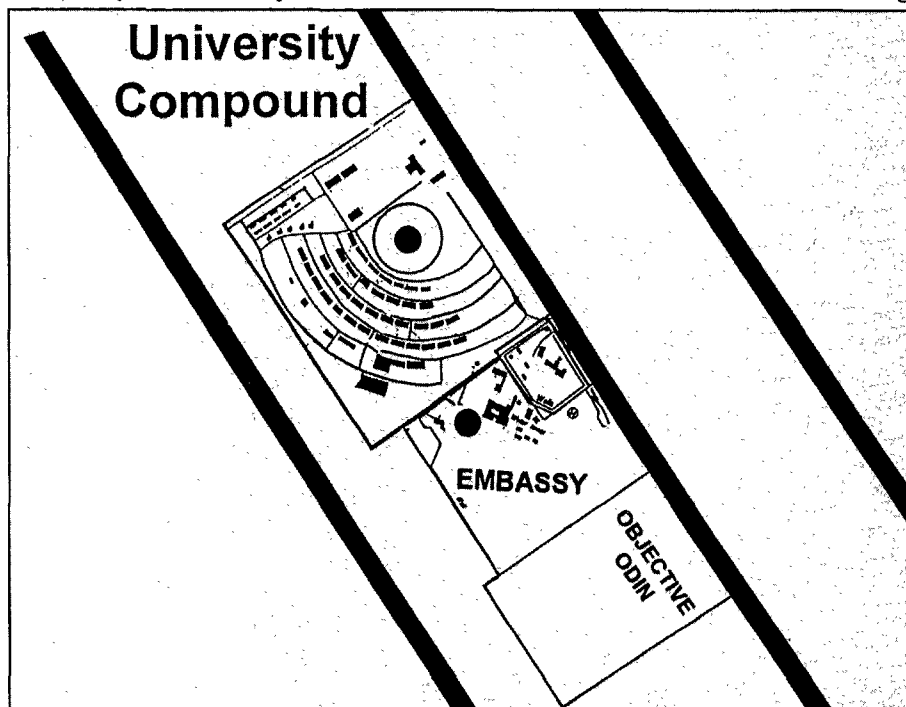


Figure 1

fires during infiltration and exfiltration, and coordinate with the Turkish guards normally positioned there (that is, to avoid friendly fire). The lead element, Company B, moved out from a gate between the University and Embassy compounds, on the northern side of the two camps. Movement began sometime between 0445 and 0450, with the goal of having all units in place by 0507.

The orders group picked this specific time for initiation because of the local religion. At 0500 each morning, the holy men would climb into the minarets of the mosques and, using loudspeakers, announce the call to prayer. Most of the locals would appear outside the buildings and begin moving to the mosques 10 or 15 minutes later. Thus, being in place by 0507 would mean that most of the locals would be awake and dressed, but not yet outside. This played directly into our course of action: The Somalis would not be outside to observe our infiltration, but would still be able to move outdoors quickly in response to our PSYOPs messages.

Company B moved along Route ASGAR until they reached Checkpoint 3 (CP 3), then proceeded along Route BALDER so as to approach THOR from the east. The following element, Company C, moved along ASGAR to approach LOKI from the south. No vehicles moved with these lead companies. My support soldiers and I moved dismounted in the center of the Company B column, which advanced in two parallel files along either side of the street. All went well until Company B halted momentarily at CP 6. The leaders from that company went forward to reconnoiter the objective and confirm unit positions and entry points. During that time, a Company B squad leader fired a warning shot over the head of a Somali male who approached the company column from a

side street and refused to stop when challenged. This intruder fled, but the obvious concern now was that the shot had alerted the Somali militia.

Once the two companies were in position, the attached platoon from the 87th Infantry battalion followed on Route ASGAR using eight armored high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) equipped with Mk 19 automatic grenade launchers and M60 machineguns. They moved to and occupied blocking positions one through five (BPs 1-5), with the mission of interdicting enemy reinforcements and dispersing crowds. The cordon was in place. The command group in the tactical command post (TAC) and the PSYOPs HMMWVs moved with this motorized platoon, but separated from the cordon force and moved to the detainee collection point between the two objectives.

At 0510, the assault began, using a graduated response. Our first action, under the rules of engagement, was to initiate with loudspeakers that an-

nounced our presence and intent. The PSYOPs HMMWV was in position at the intersection with the TAC. The basis of the message was that U.S. forces had the two compounds surrounded, and that those who came out unarmed would have their safety guaranteed. After five minutes of repeating the announcement, during which time no one emerged, both companies simultaneously blew holes through the compound walls and began clearing the buildings inside. The clearing operation went smoothly, with no gunfire required, and netted 50 detainees. Company B found two AK-47s and two 82mm mortar rounds on THOR. They placed the rifles on the TAC vehicle, and blew the mortar rounds in place during the withdrawal from the objective. All 50 of the detainees taken were males, which indicated that they were most likely SNA militia.

While the companies were searching the two objectives, a crowd of Somalis formed about 400 meters north of the objective area. They had emplaced a burning obstacle there, but so far had not interfered with the mission. Finally, both companies completed their searches and were consolidating to prepare for withdrawal. Without any warning, an RPG exploded on the western wall of THOR, beside a gate that only seconds earlier had been vacated by a sergeant from Company B. Coming from the vicinity of the burning roadblock, which was very close to Benadir Hospital, this RPG had traveled almost 500 meters down the road between the two objectives and exploded less than 50 meters away from the TAC and the detainee collection point. The angle of impact indicated that the point of origin had been an elevated position on the roof of the Benadir Hospital. Soldiers of Companies B and C in position on the northern sides

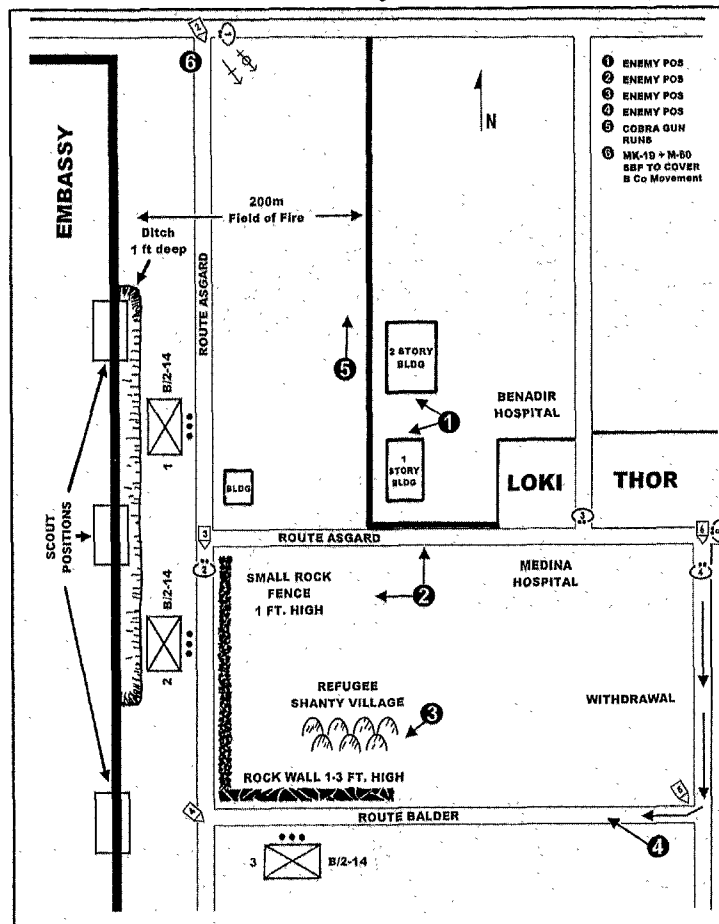


Figure 2

of their respective objectives returned fire into the roadblock area.

After recovering from the prone position, my soldiers and I moved the detainees into better cover behind the corner of THOR. Simultaneously, the battalion commander ordered the armored HMMWV at BP 3 to displace to cover the road between the two objectives, and gave the order for withdrawal to begin. The companies' return fire stopped very quickly while they continued to scan for targets.

As the companies began their withdrawal from LOKI and THOR—which in itself was an involved maneuver because of the number of occupied buildings and the open spaces within the compounds—they began to receive more RPG and small arms fire from Benadir Hospital. Another RPG impacted inside THOR, wounding a Company B soldier with fragments. Soldiers were conducting squad and platoon-level break-contact drills at this point, returning fire and bounding backwards from building to building to reach the initial entry points. While the opposing forces exchanged fire at the range of about 500 meters, I completed the evacuation of the detainees with a second turnaround of the combat trains vehicles. Curiously enough, we did not draw any fire while moving the detainees back along Route ASGARD. It was clear that either the Somalis would not shoot at us while we were carrying their compatriots, or the bulk of their force had massed at ODIN and had not yet moved from the objective area to positions along our withdrawal route. This situation was to change very quickly.

The battalion commander ordered the attached platoon to abandon its blocking positions, and the platoon quickly returned to the safety of the University. Immediately following this withdrawal, firing on LOKI and THOR picked up substantially, then fell off just as quickly once the Somalis realized that most of the U.S. soldiers were moving

off the objectives. Company C completed withdrawal from LOKI and began moving back along Route ASGARD, reaching the University compound with minimal contact.

Company B, meanwhile, was having problems. The 1st Platoon left the objective and, as ordered, started down Route ASGARD following Company C. But the initial entry point for the 2d and 3d Platoons proved to be the target for accurate fires from Benadir Hospital, which had the height to observe down into THOR and across the open ground inside. Consequently, the commander of Company B ordered another hole blown through the wall closer to Checkpoint 6. He also ordered 1st Platoon to return to lead the company back along Route BALDER. After moving his company off THOR, he had to go back along the east side of this objective to reestablish contact with the TAC. The command group had failed to follow 1st Platoon out and was pinned down as it attempted to cross the road between the two objectives. While attempting to reach the TAC, the company commander came under fire from points within LOKI and THOR, areas U.S. troops had vacated only minutes before. Apparently, during the lull in fires following the withdrawal of the attached platoon, the SNA militia had rapidly advanced from the Benadir area to ODIN. After linking up with the battalion commander and his command group, Company B began withdrawing

along Route BALDER with the TAC following. They continued to receive sporadic fire all along this route, but were able to continue movement.

As the lead soldiers of Company B approached Checkpoint 3, they once again came under heavy RPG and small arms fire. This fire divided 1st Platoon, leaving a squad and a half on either side of the intersection at CP 3. The platoon leader briefly considered conducting a limited assault to clear the enemy positions to the east but dismissed the idea after observing the complete lack of cover to his front. Instead, he had his men return fire from behind a one-foot-high rock wall on the eastern side of Route BALDER, while he called 2d Platoon forward to supplement his suppressive fires. As 3d Platoon and the TAC approached CP 4, they received fire from Somalis who were attempting to flank 2d Platoon's position by moving through a refugee shanty village. Here, 3d Platoon stopped and engaged, effectively catching this SNA flanking maneuver in a crossfire.

Throughout all of this action near CPs 3 and 4, the scout snipers on the wall to Company B's rear had been selectively eliminating targets with their sniper rifles (M24 7.62mm and Barrett .50 caliber). Also, several Turkish armored personnel carriers, acting independently, came forward from a permanent checkpoint they manned near CP 2 to assist briefly with suppression.

This massing of fires from various points by multiple units allowed for the suppression of identifiable enemy positions. The enemy, however, was moving from point to point to engage, using the occupied civilian houses as shields. The U.S. soldiers, under the rules of engagement, could not, and for the most part did not, indiscriminately suppress large areas for fear of either hitting noncombatants or running out of ammunition. Many civilians were moving to the front of Company B in an attempt to get out of the way. This forced

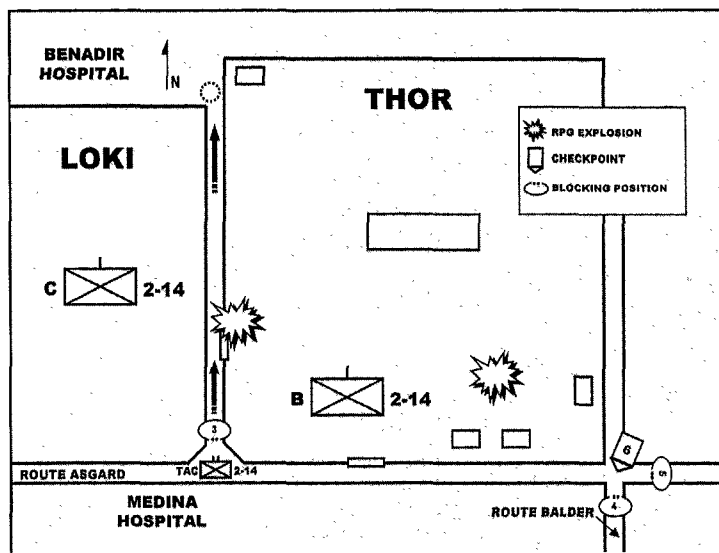


Figure 3

the U.S. soldiers to scan a large area to identify the exact source of incoming fire. As a result, the Company B commander determined that the enemy fire was still too heavy for his unit to try to move the last 800 meters along the Embassy wall. Instead, he ordered his attached engineers to blow a hole through that wall immediately to the company's rear, but this attempt failed. The field-expedient picket charges the engineers carried did not have the necessary blast to blow through two feet of reinforced concrete. The leader of 2d Platoon took fragments in the knee from this blast. At almost the same time, a 7.62mm round hit a soldier of 1st Platoon, penetrating the buttstock of his weapon and then his flak jacket before striking him in the abdomen. His wound was severe, and it was obvious that both men would need medical evacuation.

The Company B commander contacted the battalion commander, who was only 200 meters to his rear, and requested the use of the scout weapons team, which was under the control of the task force for this mission. The team consisted of one OH-58D and two AH-1 Cobra helicopters. It greatly enhanced their response time that their brigade commander (who was also the brigade task force commander) was on the ground with our TAC. The Cobras commenced gun runs using their 20mm cannons, going from south to north about 150 meters to the east of and parallel to Company B's front. Because of the large presence of noncombatants, however, the Cobras could not fire directly on the enemy's positions. Instead, the area of impact was about 50 meters to the enemy's front in the large open area that separated Company B and the SNA. Despite this limitation, the Cobras' support had a dramatic effect on the enemy's suppressive fires.

Taking advantage of this shift in the superiority of fires, the battalion commander called forward the antitank (AT) platoon (the battalion reserve) and a field litter ambulance. The AT platoon consisted of four HMMWVs, armed with two Mk 19s and two M60s. Following the last Cobra gun run, these AT vehicles established a support position at CP 2 and began to engage the

enemy, while the ambulance dashed forward along the Embassy wall to pick up Company B's wounded. Although this vehicle had its antenna shot off, and sustained several bullet holes through its cargo compartment, it successfully evacuated the wounded.

Now freed of its casualties, Company B began a rapid leap-frogging along the Embassy wall, conducting internal fire and movement at the platoon level. As they reached CP 2 and

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the AT vehicles, they rounded the corner and basically began to double-time to the compound gate. Just as the trail platoon came through the entrance, a final RPG detonated on a bunker beside the gate. No injuries resulted, even though a soldier of the scout platoon was inside the bunker at the time. Finally, the AT vehicles abandoned their position at CP 2 and, at about 0930, were the last to enter through the gate.

The fight itself had lasted approximately two hours. The soldiers successfully accomplished the mission and achieved the battalion commander's end state of having all forces closed in the University. Company B suffered three wounded. Aided reported to the world press a few days later that the SNA sustained losses of between 25 and 60 killed.

This was the first engagement of company size or larger and the first extended fight for the battalion in Mogadishu. Previously, firefights had amounted to brief sniping or harassing fire actions, limited in intensity and maneuver. The key event of this battle occurred when Company B massed all of the fire support at its disposal and conducted casualty evacuation, thus being able to continue its retrograde action unimpeded. If the company had

continued to lie unsupported in its generally exposed position, or if the soldiers had tried to withdraw while carrying their wounded, it would undoubtedly have suffered more casualties.

Neither side could claim a significant tactical victory. The battalion had successfully cleared and searched its objective and had broken contact, with only minimal casualties. U.S. forces had not deprived the SNA of any key leaders or large amounts of armaments and had, in a sense, been forced off the battlefield. Conversely, it can be safely assumed that the SNA would surely have preferred to inflict more than three casualties. What categorizes this mission as a success is that the task force was able to extricate itself with so few casualties simply because it abided by certain key principles of retrograde operations.

This battle is important to contemporary military officers because it aptly demonstrates that every mission planning sequence must include the contingency of withdrawal under fire. Additionally, a withdrawal contingency must incorporate those principles of retrograde operations that place friendly strengths against enemy weaknesses. The operation should at least contain such control measures as graphics, sequencing, and reserves—even if they are not described literally in an order—that will allow troops to withdraw while under fire. A failure to properly execute the withdrawal on 13 September 1993 could easily have resulted in a debacle, with significantly higher losses in men and materiel.

It was generally true that U.S. forces had better organization, tactics, leadership, and fire support in every engagement during *Continue Hope*. And it was universally true that the Somalis were poor marksmen and were capable of only the most rudimentary maneuvering. But it was the unique way these factors were applied to this engagement that determined the outcome. Halting Company B's initial movement down Route ASGARD and moving instead along Route BALDER allowed the commander and his men to move away from the objective area while maintaining distance from the bulk of the

closing Somalis. This use of multiple routes capitalized on the SNA's poor weapons employment and maneuvering skills and gave the U.S. force time to move into range of its own supporting weapons. Once the lead elements of Company B stopped at CP 3—by which time the Somalis had maneuvered forward and were attempting to close with the U.S. soldiers—the large open area essentially became an obstacle. This obstacle prevented the SNA from using its preferred technique of attacking from close-in with automatic fires. Thus, the obstacle kept Company B from becoming decisively engaged. The company could have continued to withdraw at this point, but doing so would have been at the expense of additional casualties.

While it was pinned down against the Embassy wall, Company B was getting fire support from defending forces, mainly from the scout snipers. While the impact of these snipers may seem limited compared to the firepower of an infantry company, the snipers had several advantages over the pinned down soldiers of Company B. They were much more familiar with the area to their front; they were able to shoot from fortified positions that were not drawing heavy fire; and they did not have to move because they were already in a secure area. Thus, they were able to deliver accurate, pinpoint fires despite civilian presence and, in the case of the Barrett .50 caliber, even shoot through trees and walls that the enemy was using for cover. While they did not decimate the enemy's ranks, they did force the SNA to be more selective and cautious while shooting and maneuvering, and created a more equal exchange of fires between the two opposing forces.

Finally, the use of air and ground reserves in the form of the Cobras, the AT platoon, and the ambulance allowed Company B to move the last 800 meters quickly and with no further casualties. The Cobras were especially useful in suppressing the fires of the SNA, who were clearly intimidated by the heavy weapons on these aerial platforms. This intimidation translated directly into fire superiority for the company, which allowed the ground reserve to come for-

ward to assist. The ambulance and its AT escort allowed the company to reorganize and poise itself for the last dash to CP 2. Again, Company B probably could have made it back to the safety of the compound without these assets, but their presence and use allowed the withdrawal to occur without further casualties.

In addition to these lessons, several other points of interest came to light during the course of this battle, as well as the entire tour of duty in Mogadishu: In operations other than war—even more so than in conventional operations—the principles of security, discipline, and flexibility are paramount to success and safety. The rapid escalation of the situation, from that of a *cordon and search* to a full-fledged task force engagement, occurred with no time to move from a relaxed to a combat-ready mode. If leaders at all levels do not enforce this readiness, the time required to make the transition will be paid for with casualties. Also, identifying the source of fire in urban operations is a skill that is lacking in most non-veteran soldiers. Small-unit leaders must be prepared to direct the fires of individual soldiers to specific targets, and to mark the targets if necessary.

Urban operations of this kind bring a new twist to the issue of firepower and the soldier's basic load. Operating for short durations—with no front lines or lines of communication, and no known enemy positions—essentially means that each mission must be treated as a raid into enemy territory. During this two-hour battle, Company B alone expended 4,800 rounds of 5.56mm ball, 1,500 rounds of 5.56mm tracer, 2,500 rounds of 5.56mm linked, and 2,200 rounds of 7.62mm linked—roughly half of the unit's basic load. Leaders should place extra emphasis upon carrying increased amounts of ammunition and water, most logically at the expense of food and additional clothing items. Also, the combat trains vehicles, wherever they are positioned, must carry an onboard stock of emergency ammunition resupply.

The outcome of this battle, which was essentially the "bloodying" of the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, was signifi-

cant because it set a new operational tone and altered the unit's perception of the SNA. The surprisingly rapid massing and aggressive response of the enemy were now considered during any and all operational planning. Additionally, the battalion's soldiers gained great confidence in their unit, its training, and its leaders. The observed reaction from the SNA was an immediate decrease in the harassment from mortars and snipers. Following this battle, the enemy, instead of moving into the area of compounds or convoy routes to initiate an engagement, generally engaged U.S. forces only when they deliberately intruded on SNA territory.

This battle changed the nature of the battalion's operations in Somalia. It boosted confidence and esprit de corps, but it also added a new gravity to the way each soldier viewed his job in Mogadishu. The lessons of this battle should also have immediately affected U.S. policy—specifically, that regarding the level of U.S. combat power, mission "creep," and strategic objectives. Before this could take place, however, the soldiers of the battalion had occasion to put these lessons to use, during the night of 3-4 October 1993, when they were called upon to reinforce Task Force Ranger in recovering crews and equipment from two downed helicopters. In that battle, two companies (plus) from the battalion, along with one company-sized element from TF Ranger, more than held their own against incredible odds, and inflicted staggering losses upon a determined enemy.

These soldiers trained for and passed the uncompromising test of combat, and we must ensure that all U.S. soldiers committed to similar missions are as well prepared and well supported as were the soldiers of the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry.

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